

The Challenges of Command

*The Royal Navy's Executive Branch Officers,
1880–1919*



Robert L. Davison

THE CHALLENGES OF COMMAND

Corbett Centre for Maritime Policy Studies Series

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Professor Greg Kennedy, Dr Tim Benbow and Dr Jon Robb-Webb,
Defence Studies Department, Joint Services Command and Staff College, UK

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The Challenges of Command

The Royal Navy's Executive Branch Officers, 1880–1919

ROBERT L. DAVISON
*Wilfrid Laurier University and
University of Guelph, Canada*

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Contents

<i>List of Tables</i>	vii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xi
1 Introduction	1
2 Social Change and the Officer Corps	25
3 The Nineteenth-Century Officer Corps	49
4 Threats to Professional Status	81
5 “Oh, These Magicians and Necromancers, They Are Ruining Us” – The Clash of Sailors and Engineers	117
6 The Reinvention of the Officer Corps	143
7 History as a Professional Tool	167
8 Journals and Staffs: Organizational Change	185
9 <i>Auxillium ab Alto</i> – The Experience of War	219
10 Conclusion	247
<i>Appendices</i>	257
<i>Bibliography</i>	261
<i>Index</i>	285

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List of Tables

4.1	Projected shortages of executive officers	105
4.2	Average time in billet of a sample of officers changing appointments in 1913	111
4.3	Officers employed, 31 December 1901	112
5.1	Personnel in the Royal Navy, 1838–1898	122
5.2	Promotion ratios, executive and engineering officers, 1918	128
6.1	Results of the 1903 Selection Committee	148
6.2	Arrangement of hours H.M.S. <i>Britannia</i> , 1875	157
6.3	Training of gunnery and torpedo lieutenants	158
9.1	Royal Navy losses, 1914–1918	229

Appendices

Navy Strength and Expenditure	258
British Government Spending 1860–1913 (£ millions)	258
Parentage of Engineer Students Entering Royal Naval Engineering College, Keyham, 1897–1905 (Old Scheme)	259

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Robert L. Davison, PhD
Kitchener, Ontario
July 2011

List of Abbreviations

ACNS	Assistant Chief of the Naval Staff
ADM	Admiralty Papers
BL	British Library
<i>BPP</i>	<i>British Parliamentary Papers</i>
BTY	D. Beatty Papers
CAB	Cabinet Papers
CCAC	Churchill College Archives Centre, Cambridge
CHAR	Chartwell Papers (Winston S. Churchill)
CID	Committee of Imperial Defence
CINC	Commander-in-Chief
CNS	Chief of the Naval Staff
COS	Chief of Staff
CW	Commissions and Warrant Branch, Admiralty Secretariat
DCNS	Deputy Chief of the Naval Staff
DEW	K.G.B. Dewar Papers
DNI	Director of Naval Intelligence
DNO	Director of Naval Ordnance
DRAX	R. Drax Papers
DRBK	J. de Robeck Papers
DRYR	F. Dreyer Papers
ED	Papers of the Board of Education
ERA	Engine Room Artificer
FAA	Fleet Air Arm
GDFY	J.H. Godfrey Papers
GSP	Good service pension
HEN	W.H. Henderson Papers
NMM	National Maritime Museum, Greenwich
NOE	G. Noel Papers
NRP	Naval Review Papers
RAF	Royal Air Force
RIC	H.W. Richmond Papers
RN	Royal Navy
RNAS	Royal Naval Air Service
RNM	Royal Naval Museum, Portsmouth
RNR	Royal Naval Reserve
RNVR	Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve
<i>RUSI</i>	<i>Journal of the Royal United Services Institution</i>

T	Treasury Papers
<i>TIME</i>	<i>Transactions of the Institute of Marine Engineers</i>
TNA	The National Archives, Kew
WMYS	R. Wemyss Papers

Chapter 1

Introduction

*It is on our Officers as much as on our men that the strength of the Navy depends; and their increased efficiency is of at least as much national importance as an extra inch or two of iron on the sides of our ships, or a few additional foot-tons to the striking energy of our shot.*¹

When approaching the pre-1914 Royal Navy executive officer branch,² the historian must empathize with the sentiment expressed in 1903 by Thomas Gibson Bowles, MP:

To many members of this House the sea is a horror, the Navy a mystery, and the naval officer an enigma; to explain the functions of the naval officer how he is produced, and how dangerous it is to tamper with the provisions whereby he is brought to a perfect state, is a task which might appall even a seaman, and which is doubly difficult to me, who am, after all, but a landsman.³

Although Bowles was daunted by even the contemplation of personnel policy, it did not prevent him making a nuisance of himself to successive Boards of Admiralty. It is equally daunting for a historian to pick through the remains of Admiralty business conducted a century ago.

The experience of the Royal Navy executive officer corps in the era of the Great War appears on the surface to be a collection of unconnected conflicts. The Fisher reforms, the dispute over engineering, the feud between Admirals Sir John Fisher and Lord Charles Beresford in 1907–1909, the imposition of a naval war staff in 1912 and the stresses of World War I all seem disjointed episodes. What connected them, however, was a series of adjustments that officers were forced to make in view of changes in politics, industry, economics, finance and British

¹ J.K. Laughton, “Naval Promotion Arithmetically and Historically Considered”, *Journal of the Royal United Services Institution (RUSI)*, XXIV, no. 106 (1881), 535.

² The term “executive officer branch” denotes only those commissioned officers of the seaman branch that were entitled to exercise command over warships. These officers bore the titles of admiral, captain, commander, lieutenant and sub-lieutenant. It does not include other specialist commissioned officers such as Royal Marines, engineers, medical or paymaster officers. The situation became somewhat muddled, however, after the introduction of the Selborne reforms of December 1902 where newly recruited officers of the marines and engineers were integrated with the seaman branch.

³ House of Commons, *Debates*, 4th ser., vol. CXIX(1903), col. 882. Bowles left the service as a sub-lieutenant.

society. On almost every level, the traditional form of leadership of the executive officer corps was challenged.

Executive officers were indeed presented with what in effect amounted to a revolution in naval affairs.⁴ As the Navy was transformed into an industrialized workplace, officers were challenged by an alteration in the “culture of command”. Command arrangements centred on the sailing ship were still being imposed on the steam and steel fleet at the turn of the century. Indeed, despite the triumph of scientific or specialist knowledge, seamanship remained the ultimate mark of competence. Commissioned sea time “in a ship of war at sea” was the prerequisite for promotion. Even shore establishments were designated as warships and replicated as far as possible the routine of a sailing vessel.⁵ The response to this revolution in naval affairs was twofold and is best represented by the so-called materialist and historical-intellectual strains of naval thought. One extreme held that the practical requirements of a modern navy meant that officers must primarily be technicians. On the other hand, it was held by some that while technological change was vital, nonetheless it was crucial that technical matters be subject to the dictates of national policy, strategy and tactics. The staff command system, advocated by officers as varied as Charles Beresford, Cyprian Bridge and Herbert Richmond, was designed to coordinate technology, tactics and strategy. Not only would this coordinate policy but it would also serve as a way of maximizing operational efficiency and reducing cost.⁶

Indeed, even the success that enabled the Navy to extract resources from Parliament was problematic. The increase in the size of the fleet impinged on the resources of those classes that for the previous three-quarters of a century had supplied the service with its officers. Expansion in absolute size was amplified

⁴ The expression “revolution in naval affairs” is used in a broader sense than in the literature surrounding revolutions in military affairs (RMA) that came to the fore in the 1990s. The revolution in naval matters at the end of the nineteenth century encompassed not merely changes in strategic and tactical posture but also in the social, cultural and intellectual construction of the naval service. Much of the RMA debate focuses on direct employment of force or the threat of force and as Colin Gray warned often provides “a siren call to indulge teleology”. See C. Gray, *Strategy for Chaos: Revolutions in Military Affairs and the Evidence of History* (London: Frank Cass, 2002), 15.

⁵ For instance, the cadet training establishment was H.M.S. *Britannia*, the gunnery school was *Excellent* and the torpedo school was *Vernon*. Indeed, in present day Commonwealth navies shore establishments are, in effect, ships.

⁶ For example, C. Bridge, “Material Versus Knowledge in Naval Warfare,” *The Times*, 2 March 1906. “Until we put the treatment of inert material in its proper place, and make study of naval warfare the first demand on a naval officer’s attention, our present methods, with all their intolerable costliness, will continue. A knowledge of naval warfare cannot be acquired, like a knowledge of Esperanto, by attendance at occasional lectures. Instead of spending most of his time dabbling with material, the naval officer should devote his attention so thoroughly to considering the problems of war that a knowledge of them will permeate his whole being.”

by the growth in the infrastructure required to administer the naval establishment. Moreover, increased public interest in defence matters during this period spurred the widespread questioning of the professional expertise of the officer corps. During the Great War, the dreadnought battleships constructed at great cost did little, in the view of the layman, to prevent Britain's near starvation in 1917 through the agency of German submarines. Naval officers found it increasingly difficult to convince their political and financial masters that they could be trusted to meet the requirements of naval defence.

With the work of John Knox Laughton, Alfred Thayer Mahan and others during this era, officers and, indeed, the general public, increasingly accepted that naval leadership needed to become "scientific" and "professional".⁷ Growing popular interest in naval affairs also led to increased public scrutiny to ensure that the officer corps met these expectations. The Boer War further reinforced this popular interest, when the Army was forced to commit 500,000 troops to subdue a guerrilla force. As a result, assurances by those in gold braid were increasingly met with scepticism. Coupled with growing tensions in international relations and the increased cost of the British defence establishment, growing criticism was directed not merely at the Admiralty but at the very claims of leadership advanced by the executive officer corps. Indeed, the aftermath of the South African War saw the triumph of the concept of national efficiency that, in the view of Geoffrey Searle, transcended political and class lines.⁸ A widespread concern came to the fore that Britain was losing its capacity to compete with rising industrial powers (especially Germany and the United States) and hence national and imperial regeneration was required to ensure the future prosperity and security of the British Empire.

The leadership was not only challenged politically but was also confronted by the growth of other professions around the fringes of the naval establishment and by the engineers, a group that undermined the claims of the executive in a fundamental way. Each of these professions sought not only to control their own work but also to gain a more powerful voice in the administration of the Royal Navy and the Board of Admiralty. The latter, aside from its political members, was the preserve of the executive alone. The aspirations of medical doctors, accounting officers, naval instructors and others could be accommodated within the system

⁷ On Laughton, see especially A. Lambert, *The Foundations of Naval History: John Knox Laughton, the Royal Navy and the Historical Profession* (London: Chatham, 1998); and D.M. Schurman, *The Education of a Navy: The Development of British Naval Strategic Thought, 1867–1914* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968). On Mahan, see J. Sumida, *Inventing Grand Strategy and Teaching Command: The Classic Works of Alfred Thayer Mahan Reconsidered* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); and J. Goldrick and J.B. Hattendorf (eds), *Mahan Is Not Enough: The Proceedings of a Conference on the Works of Sir Julian Corbett and Admiral Sir Herbert Richmond* (Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, 1993).

⁸ G. Searle, *The Quest for National Efficiency* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971).

because Admiralty regulations ensured that they could never be anything more than auxiliaries to the core functions of the establishment. But the situation was much different with engineers. The triumph of steam and rapid technological change from the 1860s onwards destroyed one of the key claims of executive leadership at a time when traditional seamanship skills were effectively demolished. Further, the development of engineering and the self-confident assertions of naval engineers and their allies meant that a significant element of command was removed from the direct supervision of deck officers. Although engineers never aspired to displace the ship's captain, they did attempt to seize control over key areas of the establishment and hence to undermine, if only incidentally, the authority of the executive branch.

The leadership of the officer corps was challenged on yet another level: its social status was questioned. With the increased education available to the working class and the need for new technical skills among naval ratings, the "traditional" methods of command based on class and gold braid were no longer sufficient. Along with the increased educational attainments of ratings came pressure for the establishment of suitable career paths and, eventually, the possibility of this body of men attaining commissioned rank.⁹ One of the points of pride of the executive branch, and indeed one of its claims to authority, was the close client-patron connection of the corps to ratings. Officers knew Jack in all his glory as they disciplined and loved him, admiring his positive characteristics while forgiving his drunkenness and indiscretions. In the words of Admiral Sir Algernon de Horsey, "[m]y experience is that our men are like good-humoured children, full of work and zeal, and easily led – provided only that they serve under strict, tactful, and thoughtful officers".¹⁰ Advancement based entirely on merit regardless of social origin struck at the heart of arguments centred upon *noblesse oblige* and the belief that certain classes were society's "natural leaders".

With changes in education and technology it became apparent that this paternalistic relationship was increasingly unsustainable. This type of relationship was rejected by men such as Lionel Yexley, a retired petty officer, who campaigned for the improvement of ratings through his magazine, *The Fleet*, which began publishing in 1907 and launched concentrated attacks on Agnes Weston's sailors'

⁹ "Naval Recruiting", *The Royal Naval Warrant Officers' Journal*, XV (February 1902), 13–14; "The mechanical knowledge requires a higher intelligence, a larger mental grasp and a more scientific training, than that needed in the days of masts and sails, and consequently the men to be trained ... need to be drawn from the best educated among our poorer classes. Mere muscular men, which could be picked up by press-gangs ... are no longer the sort of recruits which will win in time of stress and strain."

¹⁰ "The Naval Barracks Émeute", *The Times*, 24 December 1906, 6. See also John Moresby, *Two Admirals: Admiral of the Fleet Sir Fairfax Moresby and His Son John Moresby: A Record of Life and Service in the British Navy for a Hundred Years* (London: John Murray, 1909), 396; and C. Dundas, *An Admiral's Yarns: Stray Memories of 50 Years* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1922), 82.

rests.¹¹ Other outlets, like *The Royal Naval Warrant Officers' Journal* edited by Henry Capper, also tried to improve the position of ratings. Petty officers challenged rules that permitted officers to disrate them summarily without trial by court martial. Moreover, the officer corps seemed ill at ease with those ratings not associated with the traditional duties of seamen. For instance, officers had great difficulty dealing with discipline problems among stokers, as was illustrated by events such as the Portsmouth Barracks riot of November 1906 and the mutiny in H.M.S. *Zealandia* in the spring of 1914.¹² As if this were not bad enough, all these affairs were widely reported in the press and debated in Parliament, thus subjecting the Navy, and especially the executive branch, to intense criticism.

Further, the nature of the tasks that naval officers performed had changed dramatically. The concentration of the fleet in home waters meant less chance for foreign service (where the cost of living was considerably lower than on home stations), an increased tempo of operations, heavier loads in regard to training, less leave and comparatively little time on half pay. As well, the traditional semi-independence of the corps was under attack as power gradually increased at the Admiralty with the advent of the wireless, the staff system of command and the concentration of authority in the hands of the First Sea Lord.¹³ In order to "get on" in the service, social and political connections, though still important, were decreasing in value, albeit only slowly, compared with the attainment of professional qualifications, particularly in specializations such as gunnery and torpedo. Officers felt harried and increasingly strained as a result of the rapid growth of the service. This problem was coupled with a wholesale shortage of junior officers for fleet duty that dramatically increased the routine workload of those in the lower ranks. In turn, this trend reinforced the already widening gulf between the naval officer and his civilian contemporaries.¹⁴ Naval officers were virtually compelled to proceed down the well-worn path of concentrating on routine duties with the consequence that there was a widespread failure, to use a somewhat hackneyed term, to think "outside the box". Frequent changes in billets and rotation in and out of the increasing number of training courses lessened the

¹¹ "Charity and the Navy IV: The Naval Officer", *The Fleet*, VI (April 1910), 80. Yexley wrote upon hearing that Agnes Weston was developing a "sailors' rest" for officers: "I wonder what kind of 'missionary' is going to be brought into existence to cope with these helpless sinners? Think of the large number of young officers who are every day are adopting a naval career; think of the squalid homes they come from, and think of the squalid surroundings and the horrible temptations of Osborne College into which they will be cast!"

¹² TNAADM 156/77, Disorder in H.M.S. *Zealandia*, 1914; and ADM 1/7895, Incident at Portsmouth Barracks, 1906.

¹³ *British Parliamentary Papers (BPP)*, "Board of Admiralty – Copy of an Order-in-Council Showing Designation of the Various Members of, and Secretaries to, the Board of Admiralty", vol. XLVIII, Cd. 2416 (1905), 163ff.

¹⁴ *BPP*, "Statement by the First Lord of the Admiralty Explanatory of the Navy Estimates, 1920–21", vol. XXVIII, Cmd. 619 (1920), 667.

amount of time officers spent at sea.¹⁵ As the fleet concentrated in home waters in response to growing international insecurity after 1904, command became increasingly centralized and comparatively little scope remained for individual initiative. Less prestigious appointments permitted more flexibility but were generally not sought because they carried with them lower chances for promotion.

Hence, on nearly every front the pretensions of the executive branch were challenged, and the corps was forced to take drastic steps to ensure that it remained at the forefront of the naval establishment. In the first place, the issue of technical competence was met. Measures to deal with this stretched as far back as the 1850s with the advent of the *Britannia* cadet training system and the founding of the Royal Naval College at Greenwich. While *Britannia* was to educate cadets just entering the service not only in naval discipline but also in mathematics, an increasingly essential tool given the mechanization of the fleet, Greenwich was to do the same thing for senior officers whose education was deemed to be deficient. Officers were encouraged to take courses in steam technology, modern languages, international law and basic maths.¹⁶ Moreover, the new specialist schools, H.M.S. *Excellent* for gunnery and H.M.S. *Vernon* for torpedo and electrical work, trained the best and the brightest to take the most prominent junior positions afloat who would eventually be favoured in the race to secure promotion to commander. Promotion criteria shifted in favour of officers who specialized in fields closely related to applying technology to the use of weapons. Officers like the future Admiral Sir John Fisher quickly realized the growing importance of technical matters and built their careers around this type of duty. Looking through the roster of the senior flag officers during the First World War, it is clear that nearly all who held high command were either torpedo or gunnery specialists, with the notable exception of David Beatty. Even if an officer did not qualify as a specialist, he was still compelled to take examinations in those fields to achieve the rank of lieutenant. And these exams were of more than academic interest since they established the relative seniority of officers. In essence, by the turn of the century the executive branch had begun increasingly to resemble their engineering colleagues.¹⁷

As sailing ships disappeared from the Navy List and steam became the sole motive power of the fleet, the engineer below deck gained increased responsibility. Executive officers, however, were expected to have a basic understanding of steam machinery while engineers were denied not only a status equivalent to other "executive" specializations but also the training provided to watch-keeping officers and the concomitant chance to exercise command. Further, certain social

¹⁵ TNA, ADM 1/8374/96, Memorandum on the Rate of Movement of Officers within the Fleet, 1913.

¹⁶ BPP, "Report of the Committee Appointed to Inquire into the Foundation of the Royal Naval College, Greenwich", vol. XXI, C. 1733 (1877), 420–421.

¹⁷ BPP, "Memorandum dealing with the Entry, Training and Employment of Officers and Men of the Royal Navy and Royal Marines", vol. LXI, Cd. 1385 (1902), 677.

disadvantages were associated with engineering.¹⁸ The most ambitious method of dealing with this problem was the adoption in December 1902 of the Selborne Scheme, which virtually annexed the engineering branch to the executive and destroyed the separate avenues of entry.¹⁹ Henceforth, all combatant officers were to be engineers and have the appropriate training.²⁰

Another mechanism that played a role in this redefinition of the officer corps was history itself. The rise of “scientific” history and the development of the staff system of command placed the legitimacy of the command function of the service on a different footing. History offered the corps a unique tool to reassert their competence. First and foremost, the study of the past provided a way to bridge the gap between science and the imponderables of naval leadership. Hence, the essential characteristics of line officers could effectively be modernized by synthesizing the old and the new. Historically derived principles placed the new executive branch on a “scientific” basis and yet they still provided conceptual space and intellectual, social and political respectability for the traditional concepts of command and leadership. History could then be used to regularize the training of officers and be useful in the production of scientific principles to guide command decisions. By fixing the questions to be asked of the available historical evidence, and by making the results of these scientific examinations of the historical record available, the executive officer corps could use history to cement its dominance.

This conception of the potential use of history foundered, however, on the rocks of scholarship. The difficulty was that external experts like Julian Corbett and Spenser Wilkinson, and some officers within the service itself, such as Herbert Richmond and Cyprian Bridge, took these scientific precepts of modern naval history seriously and began to apply them to the formulation of contemporary policy.²¹ Hence, for the officer corps history became a double-edged sword. While it made a convenient tool to reassert the dominance of the executive, it became a threat when it began to ask basic “scientific” questions about the education of officers. The problem was that those without extensive command experience and even civilians could discern these “scientifically” derived principles and could offer reasoned critiques of the actions of officers.

¹⁸ TNA, ADM 7/931, Engineering Students’ Parentage, 1909.

¹⁹ BPP, “Memorandum dealing with the Entry, Training and Employment of Officers and Men of the Royal Navy and of the Royal Marines”, vol. LXI, Cd. 1385 (1902).

²⁰ A.J. Marder (ed.), *Fear God and Dread Nought: The Correspondence of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fisher of Kilverstone*, 3 vols (London: Jonathan Cape, 1952–1959), I, 269, Fisher to J.R. Thursfield, 22 January 1903.

²¹ J.S. Corbett, “War Course: Strategic Terms and Definitions used in Lectures on Naval History”, in J.S. Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (1911, Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1988), 307–325; S. Wilkinson, *The Brain of the Navy* (London: Constable, 1895); H.W. Richmond, “Introductory”, *The Naval Review*, I (1913), 9–14; C. Bridge, *The Art of Naval Warfare* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1907); *Sea Power and Other Studies* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1910).

This bid to apply historical principles to contemporary problems was reflected by the foundation of the Naval War Staff under Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, in 1912 and the establishment of *The Naval Review* in 1913 as a vehicle of discussion and reform within the service. By systematically attempting to apply historical principles to the exercise of command and the culture of the officer corps, these writers were trying to ensure that executive officers would be competent to carry out their core responsibility: the exercise of military command at sea. The First World War exposed key weaknesses in the professional training of naval officers. As in other armed services, total war created a crisis of confidence in the professional competence of the established leadership of the Royal Navy, with a constant flow of misdirected energy and strategic and tactical errors culminating in the dismissal of Admiral Sir John Jellicoe from the Admiralty in December 1917.

Historiography

To deal with the issue of the Royal Navy officer corps it is necessary to address two strands of existing literature. The first comprises material relating to British naval policy prior to 1914. The second is a body of literature regarding the issue of military professionalization as it relates directly to the experience of officer corps, naval and military, in the modern period.

One of the chief problems with much of the historical literature has been its tendency to serve, albeit often indirectly and unintentionally, institutional interests. It is not that some naval historians have been intellectually dishonest or have deliberately manipulated evidence, but rather that many of them have imposed an important conceptual constraint on their investigations by failing to ask basic questions about the foundations of their sub-discipline. One of the pillars of naval history from the beginning has been the expectation that it would reinforce the traditional authority of deck officers and act as a guide in the formulation of state policy. Indeed, what was perhaps the seminal work of the sub-discipline in its formative stages, Alfred Thayer Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*, was purposely written to further the power of the state.²² This tradition has imposed a handicap on naval historians and has limited the questions that they have asked of the available record. Fortunately, several attempts have been made in the recent past to reinvent naval history and reconnect it to broader problems in modern scholarship.²³

²² A.T. Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783* (1890, New York: Dover, 1987), 25–89.

²³ For two examples, see J.B. Hattendorf (ed.), *Ubi Sumus? The State of Naval and Maritime History* (Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, 1994); and J.B. Hattendorf (ed.), *Doing Naval History: Essays toward Improvement* (Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, 1995).

These self-imposed limitations have been a marked feature of the historiography concerning the Royal Navy during and prior to World War I. The cornerstone, of course, has been the work of Arthur J. Marder. Marder wrote a five-volume study of the Royal Navy in the *Dreadnought* era.²⁴ Based on exhaustive research in the materials that were then available, Marder's study wove together diplomacy, domestic politics, naval policy and the experience of global war. As impressive as his scholarship was, however, there was a problem with the way he conceptualized his study. For example, as Jon Sumida and David Rosenberg have argued, his discussion of naval policy was confined to conceptual "black boxes" with no attempt to probe related issues such as personnel policy or technology.²⁵ An even graver problem was that Marder was in many ways a "true believer" in that he admired the Royal Navy as an institution and, in fact, during the Second World War he attempted to join it after being rejected as medically unfit by the US Navy.²⁶

Although he loved the institution, Marder's liberal views also led him to identify with officers who wanted to reform the system.²⁷ In particular, Marder was a profound admirer of both Admirals Sir Herbert Richmond and Sir John Fisher and published collections of their papers in the 1950s.²⁸ Marder's handling of the latter was problematic because he largely accepted without deeper examination the image that Fisher fashioned for himself as a reformer facing off against reactionaries. His concentration on Fisher tended to overshadow much else of importance in the naval service; consequently, his work provided only a surface explanation of the evolution of the officer corps.

Nor was Marder alone in this, for others have been enthralled by Fisher's personality and energy. One of these writers was Jan Morris, who in *Fisher's Face* claimed to have fallen in love with the Admiral in childhood. The characterization of Fisher as a broad-minded, liberal reformer and his opponents as irretrievable reactionaries has attracted a number of adherents, such as Geoffrey Penn and Robert K. Massie.²⁹ The fixation on Fisher's dispute with Admiral Lord Charles

²⁴ A.J. Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow: The Royal Navy in the Fisher Era, 1904–1919*, 5 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961–1974).

²⁵ Jon Sumida and David Rosenberg, "Machines, Men, Manufacturing, Management and Money: The Study of Navies as Complex Organizations and the Transformation of Twentieth Century Naval History", in J.B. Hattendorf (ed.), *Doing Naval History*, 31.

²⁶ TNA, ADM 178/317, "Application of Dr. A. Marder, U.S. citizen, to join the Royal Navy, 1943–44".

²⁷ Barry Gough, "The Royal Navy and the British Empire", in R. Winks (ed.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume V—Historiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 330–331.

²⁸ Marder (ed.), *Fear God and Dread Nought*; and Marder (ed.), *Portrait of an Admiral: The Life and Papers of Sir Herbert Richmond* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1952).

²⁹ J. Morris, *Fisher's Face* (New York: Random House, 1995), 12; G. Penn, *Infighting Admirals: Fisher's Feud with Beresford and the Reactionaries* (London: Leo Cooper, 2000); and R.K. Massie, *Dreadnought: Britain, Germany and the Coming of the Great War* (New York: Random House, 1991).

Beresford, his magnetic personality and the extensive reforms he initiated have served to mask a large number of continuities in the Royal Navy in the period. It is commonplace to ignore the problematic nature of some of the Fisherite reforms and very simple to ascribe opposition solely to reactionary conservatism. In fact, it could be argued that Fisher's career was made by political connections and hence that his experience as a sea-going officer and his fitness for command might be regarded as suspect.³⁰ Moreover, in order to magnify his own accomplishments, he and his supporters denigrated the reforms of the pre-1900 era.

It is important to understand that Fisher portrayed himself as an ardent reformer because it suited his purposes. By attempting to ally himself with the leading edge of the Liberal Party after 1905, Fisher hoped to secure lasting power over the development of the Royal Navy. There was no attempt to introduce a naval staff system until it became clear that his days as First Sea Lord were numbered. Fisher advanced members of the "Fishpond" by methods not unlike those pursued in the nineteenth century, the only difference being that those promoted were personally useful to Fisher rather than men who possessed extensive social and family connections. This principle also extended to many of Fisher's reforms. The Selborne Scheme, which was often viewed as a democratic measure, was rather an attempt to annex the engineering branch to the executive and to centralize power in the Admiralty. As Fisher wrote to Lionel Yexley in 1909, "[t]he true secret of successful administration is the intelligent anticipation of agitation!"³¹

Some historical studies, however, have proved more helpful in exploring the development of the officer corps. In particular, the work of Donald M. Schurman has been crucial. Schurman's study, *The Education of a Navy*, was the parallel study to Jay Luuvas's *The Education of an Army*.³² Both volumes explored attempts by several writers to redefine the intellectual basis of the professional officer corps in Britain in the half century before 1914. Schurman systematically evaluated the impact of several historians on the development of the intellectual equipment of the officer corps. But he did not explore what social and intellectual role these authors played in the renaissance that followed. While there were basic changes in Britain's status in relation to the rest of the world, when navies became increasingly technologically oriented and organizationally complex, a firm intellectual basis was required to place officers and policy on solid ground. But history served a social and intellectual role beyond improving professional performance by becoming a way to reassert the culture of command and the imponderables of leadership and "practical" skill.

³⁰ Fisher had only about 6 or 7 years of sea service in the 30 years prior to taking up his appointment as Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet. This lack of sea service was at one point raised in Parliament by Sir John Colomb. Commons, *Debates*, 4th ser., vol. LXXXVI (1900), col. 339.

³¹ Marder (ed.), *Fear God and Dread Nought*, II, 258, Fisher to Yexley, 1 August 1909.

³² Schurman, *The Education of a Navy*.

There are other important studies that bear on the development of the officer corps in this period. Central are Barry Hunt's biography of Herbert Richmond and Andrew Lambert's work on John Knox Laughton.³³ Both authors agree that naval history provided a basis for the training of officers and that its scientific grounding was crucial to the formulation of doctrine. Also of importance is Jon Sumida's seminal reinterpretation of the works of Alfred Thayer Mahan, in which he discusses Mahan's efforts to blend the scientific and the spiritual to create a new brand of professional officer. Unfortunately, he did not extend his study to explore the impact of this conception on either naval officers or policy. Finally, in his study of the RN in this period, Andrew Gordon discusses the culture of command of the executive branch. He argues that there was a division of the corps between those officers who favoured centralized or looser tactical control over fleets. Gordon also makes a contribution by identifying some key problems of organization and command, but he is not concerned with examining a profession under siege and its attempt to reassert control.³⁴

It is thus clear that several historians have had an impact on the way we think about the central topic of this study. None, however, has directly engaged the core problems that faced the leadership of the Royal Navy: the threat to its autonomy and the perception that, as a group, the officers lacked the competence to confront rapid social and organizational change. Drastic measures were taken to secure executive dominance, as we will see later in this volume, and there was also recognition of the need to redefine the officer corps that would be credible intellectually, socially and culturally. This ferment lay at the root of nearly all the conflicts of the period, including the Beresford-Fisher dispute and the struggle over the foundation of the naval war staff. Further, it offers insight into the crisis experienced during the Great War.

As Jon Sumida lamented at a 1995 conference, little attention has been directed to the administrative structure of the Royal Navy in the era of the Great War.³⁵ This is especially surprising since the fleet increased dramatically in size and grew exponentially in complexity. Although much work has been done on the construction of the dreadnought battle fleet and the disputes over annual estimates, what has been less well understood has been the impact on those expected to crew and direct the new fleet. Although British industry still possessed the ability to out-build its foreign rivals, the country's naval strength was limited by other constraints. Both Sumida and Nicholas Lambert have done superlative work in

³³ B.D. Hunt, *Sailor-Scholar: Admiral Sir Herbert Richmond* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1982); and Lambert, *The Foundations of Naval History*.

³⁴ Sumida, *Inventing Grand Strategy*; and A. Gordon, *The Rules of the Game: Jutland and British Naval Command* (London: John Murray, 1996).

³⁵ Sumida and Rosenberg, "Machines, Men, Manufacturing and Money", 25–39. See also J. Sumida, "British Naval Administration in the Age of Fisher", *Journal of Military History*, LIV, no. 1 (January 1990), 1.

illustrating the connections between naval policy and financial limitations.³⁶ But that is only part of the picture. Although physical resources may have existed to construct great ships, these behemoths had to be not only paid for but also supplied with highly trained and specialized officers and ratings. These men had to be paid, and provided with equipment, education and, if any recruitment programme were to be sustainable, good career prospects. With the evolving complexity and size of the Navy such costs began to absorb a growing proportion of the government expenditures. As Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty, wrote while preparing the last pre-war estimates:

More ships *immediately* mean more men, and more men *immediately* mean more pay and more charges for training and victualling the increased numbers. Then there are more Naval stores, more ordnance stores, more establishment charges generally. More ships *soon* mean more charges for refits and repairs. Finally, more ships *ultimately* mean more non-effective charges.³⁷

Although there was a political will to maintain the pre-eminence of the Royal Navy, there were also substantial limiting factors that worked to restrain the growth in naval expenditure. For one thing there were limitations on the human resources available to the Navy. The complex and inflexible system of training officers made it difficult for the Admiralty to respond in a timely fashion to changing demands. Just before the war, for example, the Admiralty was forced to poach officers from the merchant service, to recruit public school boys without prior training (and socialization) and to promote men from the lower deck simply to provide enough officers to perform basic watch-keeping duties. The shortage of specialized executive officers in the navigation, gunnery and torpedo branches was particularly pressing. The only systematic attempt to come to grips with the training of officers and ratings was the so-called Selborne Scheme of December 1902, conceived by then Second Sea Lord Fisher. The idea was to coordinate the recruitment and training of combatant officers into a single system that would concurrently reduce administrative complexity and cost while increasing flexibility by offering opportunities for engineers and marines (after 1905) to revert to deck duties and be eligible for high command. Unfortunately, the scheme suffered from two key flaws: it never widened the intake of officers and it did little to improve the flexibility of the new “amalgamated” corps. Because of the voracious appetite for officers, the scheme had to be introduced gradually, and nearly a decade

³⁶ J. Sumida, *In Defence of Naval Supremacy* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989); and Nicholas Lambert, *Sir John Fisher's Naval Revolution* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999).

³⁷ CCAC, CHAR 13/20, “Sketch Estimates for 1914–15”; emphasis and underlining in the original. Indeed, even a straightforward expansion of the intake of the cadet establishments would have ripple effects down even to the number of servants required; see TNA, ADM 1/7632, Admiralty to Treasury, 23 January 1902.

passed before entries under the old system ended. Although successive Boards of Admiralty were fully committed to implementing the scheme, they were all too often forced to resort to expedients to find enough officers.³⁸ Three years after the introduction of the scheme, marines were dropped from the system because they had different training needs and there was a complete lack of marine officers coming out of the Osborne-Dartmouth system.³⁹

In short, the training system was simply unable to produce sufficient officers to meet the needs of the fleet. The most noticeable shortage was of lieutenants, the backbone of ship management. For example, the Walpole Committee of 1863 recognized that there was a need to maintain a close and accurate control over the numbers of this group of officers. By the early 1900s the problem became acute as the size of the fleet increased, older officers retired and the greater complexity of shore training temporarily took more officers out of the available supply for sea duty. As a result, half pay for junior officers was in effect abolished because these men were nearly constantly employed.⁴⁰

This officer shortage influenced every sphere of naval policy. Staff training and the sending of officers to the war course were constrained by the fact that these men were required for sea service. Indeed, even selection to the war course did not guarantee that officers would be able to complete it: according to the confidential books of the commandant of the course, the number of officers taken from their studies to be returned to active service was very high.⁴¹

The Royal Navy has been heavily criticized for failing to place enough emphasis on staff training. Moreover, it has sometimes been charged that this reflected a lack of intellectual breadth among senior officers or an inability to comprehend the importance of ongoing education.⁴² Although hostility to staff training can be found in the historical record, there is also evidence that many senior officers strongly advocated a wider training of officers.⁴³ The shortage of

³⁸ TNA ADM 116/1213, Special Entry Regulations, 1913; ADM 1.8370/65, Memorandum by C. Walker on Executive Lists, 1913.

³⁹ On the specific problems with marines, see TNA, ADM 116/1287, Memorandum by Deputy Adjutant-General, Royal Marines to Admiralty, 15 February 1910; and Donald Bittner, "Shattered Images: Officers of the Royal Marines, 1867–1913", *Journal of Military History*, LIX, no. 1 (1995), 34. In regard to the engineers see Geoffrey Penn, *Up Funnel, Down Screw! The Story of the Naval Engineer* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1955); TNA ADM 7/995, Admiral Fisher's Naval Necessities, vol. III (1906), 25–27, Memorandum by Captain Rosslyn Wemyss; CCAC, CHAR 13/2, G.W. Taylor to Fisher, 23 November 1911.

⁴⁰ BPP, "Report from the Select Committee on Navy Promotion and Retirement", vol. X, no. 501 (1863), 73.

⁴¹ TNA, ADM 203/100, War Course Records, 1902–1911.

⁴² See, for example, A.J. Marder, *From the Dardanelles to Oran: Studies of the Royal Navy in War and Peace, 1915–1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 58–59.

⁴³ TNA, ADM 1/7712, Minute by Prince Louis of Battenberg, 7 July 1903. Then a captain, Battenberg eventually became First Sea Lord after Admiral Sir Francis Bridgeman in 1913.

officers and the fact that many spent an increasing amount of time and energy on routine matters meant that there was less time for study; junior officers became so immersed in their day-to-day work that they became less adaptable once they reached higher ranks. With every new dreadnought that slid down the slipways, more crew and officers were required. Nor was it an alternative to draft officers from the decommissioned “bug traps” on colonial service that were being scrapped by Fisher, since many were overage and unqualified to serve in the main fleet.

Conflicting ideas about education, professionalism and officer development buzzed throughout the more literate sectors of British society in the age of the great naval reforms. Still, it would be a mistake to think that concerns over educational and professional development suddenly appeared when Fisher became Second Sea Lord in 1901 or when he returned to the Admiralty as First Sea Lord in October 1904. Fisher liked to promote himself as an ardent reformer by contrasting his views with the days when “reactionaries” ran the Navy.⁴⁴ Despite such posturing, however, we know that as far back as the 1830s elements in the Navy had been profoundly concerned about the education and professional development of its officers.

Nonetheless, even a cursory examination of the available sources demonstrates the attention paid to officer development, promotion and training in the early twentieth century. One sign of this concern is that officers of stature were placed in charge of the training establishments. Commanding officers of *Britannia* Naval College at Dartmouth in the decade before 1914 included Hugh Evan-Thomas, who commanded the 5th Battle Squadron at Jutland; William Goodenough, who commanded a cruiser squadron during the war; and Christopher Cradock, who was killed at the Battle of Coronel in November 1914. At Osborne, the first captain was Rosslyn Wemyss, who became First Sea Lord in 1917; Horace Hood, besides Beatty one of the youngest flag officers on the list, also headed the College. The various education committees included a high proportion of officers who reached the upper ranks of the service, and those examined as witnesses were generally the most able men in the executive branch.⁴⁵

Although the Navy was politically and socially conservative, it was not entirely unresponsive to the need for change. The opposition to Fisher was not so much an aversion of reform as it was resistance to some of the First Sea Lord’s ideas and the manner in which he tried to implement them. The dispute with Admiral Beresford of 1907–1909 was not based as much on professional differences as on politics. Beresford was an Irish Unionist who believed, rightly or wrongly, that Fisher was sacrificing the effectiveness of the Navy by trimming the cut of his jib to the Liberal policy of retrenchment. Fisher was also in the way of Beresford’s elevation to Admiral of the Fleet; Fisher could remain on the active list until 1911 when he reached the age of 70, while Beresford had to retire earlier.

⁴⁴ Sadly, this image of the nineteenth-century Navy has been further perpetuated in Penn, *Infighting Admirals*.

⁴⁵ TNA, ADM 116/1288, Custance Committee on Naval Education, 1912, pt. 1.

Lest it be thought that the Navy was completely dominated by old gentlemen with powerful social and family connections, some of the “non-elect” also rose to prominent places in the service. The most obvious of the latter was Fisher, who was “penniless, friendless and forlorn” when he joined.⁴⁶ Even officers with the reputation of being difficult could find themselves in good positions. Admiral Sir Herbert Richmond, for instance, was the only member of his *Britannia* term to reach full admiral on the active list, and the *enfant terrible* Kenneth Dewar reached vice admiral. Earlier in the nineteenth century Admiral Sir Astley Cooper Key had few family connections and, like Fisher, reached the top of the service. Percy Scott, the gunnery enthusiast, also reached flag rank on the active list, with his career only getting sidetracked in an unfortunate incident in 1907.⁴⁷

The Royal Navy was remarkably tolerant of reformers, radicals and assorted cranks, and, despite the upper-class pretensions of the quarterdeck, the service was interested in practical solutions to contemporary problems. Even the staunchest conservative recognized that the Navy existed in the final resort to serve the security needs of Britain by violent action. In particular, the division between “interest” and “graft” that Michael Lewis discussed in his study of the nineteenth-century Navy is apt.⁴⁸ Although in the modern view both are considered the antithesis of liberal democratic institutions and sensibilities, the difference is crucial in understanding the Navy in the nineteenth century: while graft promotes a person based solely on personal connections, interest selects an individual who first holds the qualifications necessary for the post, even if the personal factor plays an considerable role in the final decision. Like the much-derided old boy network, interest reproduces a certain set of ideals while at the same time advances able individuals. Hence, it is entirely possible for an organization to be highly effective while at the same time fostering “old corruption” in its ranks. Indeed, Admiral Sir William James was speaking only partly in jest when he argued that the way to advance in the Navy was to marry the Admiral’s daughter.⁴⁹

Moreover, Fisher was aided in his reforms by those in the derided “Fishpond”. Although Fisher did not promote individuals on the basis of social origin, he selected bright young officers who were personally loyal to him. When Fisher was accused of favouritism, however, he was merely using an existing unwritten

⁴⁶ Marder (ed.), *Fear God and Dread Nought*, II, 69–70, Fisher to Arnold White, 5 March 1906.

⁴⁷ P.H. Colomb, *Memoirs of Admiral Sir Astley Cooper Key* (London: Methuen, 1898); P. Scott, *Fifty Years in the Royal Navy* (London: John Murray, 1919). Scott was involved in a heavily publicized dispute with Lord Charles Beresford when he received a dressing-down on the Commander-in-Chief’s quarterdeck over an inappropriately worded signal. See “Lord C. Beresford and Sir P. Scott Reported at Variance”, *The Times*, 11 November 1907.

⁴⁸ M. Lewis, *The Navy in Transition, 1814–1864: A Social History* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1965), 27–28.

⁴⁹ W. James, *The Sky Was Always Blue* (London: Methuen, 1951), 82. James married the daughter of Admiral Sir Alexander Duff.

system for purposes that his opponents did not necessarily approve. As well, after 1890, the officer corps and naval policy in general attracted unprecedented and sustained scrutiny from Parliament that extended even to the details of officer training and professional development.⁵⁰ There were two related reasons for this. First, there was the growing uncertainty of the international situation. Second, there were financial and economic reasons: both the Army and the RN had reached the limit that the existing structure the British state was willing to fund. Defence expenditure in particular was growing much faster than the British economy as a whole.⁵¹

The implications of growing defence expenditures also threatened the delicate political balance in the nation and fostered a debate between two different visions of how to pay for Britain's continuing position as a world power. One faction argued that government revenues ought to be increased through indirect taxation on the lower orders, while its opponents contended that direct taxation of the upper stratum of British society through death duties and income taxes was preferable.⁵² To avoid having to choose between these two alternatives, both Conservative and Liberal governments opted instead to limit expenditure on the armed services. The financial crisis also inspired governments to demand that the armed services deliver value for money, a requirement that gave impetus to unprecedented intervention into the internal arrangements in both fighting departments. All of this occurred in the context of a widened franchise, a trend that complicated what had previously been almost predetermined choices. This change in voter eligibility gave rise to parties unwilling to toe the traditional aristocratic line, such as the Irish Nationalists and the Labour Party, both of which attacked the armed services for elitism and demanded democratic reform. In the view of both parties, there seemed no logical reason why the executive officer corps should remain the preserve of the well-to-do and the sons of officers. This concern was reinforced by demands from the rising professional classes, such as engineers.⁵³

Military Professionalization

It is impossible to deal with the problems confronting the Navy in this era without considering further the notion of professionalization. The term, as used by contemporaries and historians alike, is often vague and perhaps could be best

⁵⁰ For an example, see the debates in regard to the Selborne Scheme of December 1902. Lords, *Debates*, 4th ser., vol. CXXII (1903), cols 155–191.

⁵¹ William Ashworth, "Economic Aspects of Late Victorian Naval Administration", *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., XXII, no. 3 (1969), 491; see also my Appendix II.

⁵² Sumida, *In Defence of Naval Supremacy*, 6–28; and V. Berghahn, "Navies and Domestic Politics", in Hattendorf (ed.), *Doing Naval History*, 63.

⁵³ Lewis, *The Navy in Transition*, 26; and H. Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society: England Since 1880*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2002), 359–363.

described, like imperialism, as being “no word for scholars”.⁵⁴ Still, since much of the conflict within the Royal Navy in the years preceding the First World War involved debates over the development of what would later be referred to as professionalism, it is necessary to draw some conclusions from the relevant literature in a military context.

Since there is a consensus about certain key characteristics of this concept, a short consideration of what it means to be a “professional” is important. First, an occupational group must demonstrate that it is able to perform certain essential tasks for the benefit of the wider community more effectively and efficiently than any plausible alternative. Once this occurs, members of a group assume the mantle of being “professionals” and are able to assert primacy in a particular field of endeavour. Like other forms of service, the benefit of protection offered to society is the essential function that the officer corps provides to the wider community.⁵⁵ Like insurance underwriters, officers provide protection, but instead of managing actuarial tables these professionals organize the use of violence to further the interests of the community (or, at the very least, the interests of dominant social groups within that community). However, most models of military professionalization indicate that this progression is linear and that the end result is a fairly stable organizational structure that is able to standardize performance, regulate entrance and offer its members well-defined career paths and status.⁵⁶

In the first instance, it is imperative to understand what we mean by the term profession and it is equally important to have a comprehension of professionalization as a *process*, not merely as a static category. Perhaps the best definition of professionalism, as it relates to military organizations, is provided by Jacques van Doorn. Firstly, van Doorn argues that for an occupation to be considered professional the bar of expertise is raised and the increased status of its expert knowledge is widely accepted in the public sphere. Secondly, the individual member of the occupational group increasingly identifies him or herself with that group. Van Doorn wrote:

The two most important characteristics of a profession, however, are the following: (1) a special, well-integrated body of knowledge and skill, and a set

⁵⁴ W.K. Hancock, *The Wealth of Colonies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950), 1.

⁵⁵ For an examination of the concept of protection cost, see J. Glete, *War and the State in Early Modern Europe: Spain, the Dutch Republic and Sweden as Fiscal-Military States, 1500–1660* (London: Routledge, 2002), 54–55. Glete discusses in his prologue the concept of centralized military institutions as the cost of doing business.

⁵⁶ For examples see M. Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier: A Social and Political Portrait* (New York: Free Press, 1960); G.A. Kourvetaris and B.A. Dobratz (eds), *Social Origins and Political Orientation of Officer Corps in a World Perspective* (Denver: University of Denver Press, 1973); and J. van Doorn, *The Soldier and Social Change* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1975).

of standards and norms, handed on by means of socialization of new members; and (2) a pronounced autonomy of the profession, generally with legal support, repelling the interference of others in the recruitment, selection, and training of candidates, as well as in the occupational conduct of the professionals themselves.⁵⁷

Hence, a group aspiring to professional status is confronted with two simultaneous challenges. On one hand, it must convince a working proportion of civil society and the state of the unique nature of the importance of its specialized skill, while on the other it seeks to have considerable control over the parameters of that expertise and to secure effective dominance over the work process itself. An additional point is that, in the case of the modern professions, society is the general beneficiary of a professional's loyalty. Institutional loyalty takes a secondary role to the interests of wider society.⁵⁸

Morris Janowitz, for example, identified five main changes that mark the characteristics of professionalization within military establishments. Firstly, the institution begins to change slowly from authoritarian domination to group consensus. Command and organizational lines of authority no longer rest upon the dictates of rigid, centralized authority but shift to a system where consensus and collective lines of conduct are increasingly important. Secondly, there is a narrowing of skill differential between the civil and military elites. As the organizational and technological changes increase the complexity of the tasks to be performed by officers, those officers are forced to draw on the skills and expertise of other occupational groups. Officers, accustomed to deference in the provision of leadership, find themselves on the defensive in the preservation of the exclusive nature of their calling. For instance, Janowitz points out that in the US Army before the American Civil War, 93.2 per cent of the personnel were assigned to purely "military" occupations, but by the 1950s that proportion had fallen to 28.8 per cent.⁵⁹

Thirdly, the corps begins to recruit from wider social groups than hitherto. As the education and training required broadens, so too does pressure mount to include social groups previously excluded from leadership positions. Traditional leadership based upon social status becomes increasingly untenable. Fourthly, as the corps becomes more specialized there is a growing diversity of career patterns and experiences. This is especially critical in times of rapid change when unique experiences of individuals and different specializations may create a critical mass of officers who might be able to steer the entire establishment in new directions. Lastly, there is an engagement in the debates between politics and the dictates of honour. No longer mere warriors, modern officers begin to take on the role of professional managers and technicians. In the upper echelons, politics becomes

⁵⁷ Van Doorn, *The Soldier and Social Change*, 35.

⁵⁸ Kourvetaris and Dobratz, *Social Origins*, 6.

⁵⁹ Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier*, 9.